Everyone knew that the Montana State University-Northern Lights’ home opener was going to be an emotion-filled game. The Lights knew it, the fans knew it, and the visiting Dickinson State Blue Hawks knew it.

Sometimes, too much emotion can be a bad thing, but not Saturday. Instead, the Lights rode a tidal wave of emotion and momentum to a 40-17 victory over Dickinson State in a nonconference affair at Blue Pony Stadium.

The game was the first home game for Northern without Mark Samson as its head coach in 11 seasons. It was also the first career win for interim head coach Jake Eldridge, and the Lights’ first win of the 2014 campaign.

“It’s a very emotional win for this whole team,” said an emotional senior quarterback Travis Dean. “We know that coach (Samson) is watching us. We know he wants us to do good, and I feel like we did that today. This was a big team win for us. A lot of these guys had never played a game in Blue Pony (Stadium) before today. So it was a great experience. We had a great, emotional crowd. So it’s great to be home and get a win like this and walk out of this stadium and see everyone smiling.”

“Super happy for this team,” Eldridge said. “These guys have been working their tails off since January and through two-a-days and all the ups and downs they’ve gone through during fall camp. Just the focus these guys have had and all the hard work they’ve put in over the last few weeks, and the hard work they continue to put in day-in-and-day-out, it was great to see it finally pay off for them.”

The focus and intensity was there from the start for the Lights, who lost a tough game at Montana Tech to open the season last week in Butte. And the focus paid off quickly as the Lights scored on their opening possession for the second straight game.

Following a Tyler Craig sack, one of five by the MSU-N defense on the day, Northern took over on offense on its own 44-yard-line. And immediately, the Lights were sharp. On the opening drive, Dean drilled a pass to Trevor Baum to convert a third down, and moments later, Zach McKinley was in the endzone for the first of four times on the day when he took a ball over the left side and dove in for six.

DSU answered with a long Josh Borm field goal to make it 7-3 Lights with 8:45 to play in the first period, but from there, Northern took the game by the throat.

The Lights answered the DSU field goal with a quick drive, including four strong runs by McKinley, who rumbled for 209 yards on the day, and an 11-yard TD pass from Dean to Baum.
And Northern wasn’t done. The Lights took over on offense late in the first, and the drive carried over into the second frame. And again, it was McKinley who was the catalyst. Already in DSU territory, he broke off a 29-yard scamper, then scored on a 5-yard plunge to put the Lights up 21-3 with most of the second quarter left to play.

“I thought today we came together as a team,” McKinley said. “We were really together today. Our o-line was really firing off the ball and that gave me a lot of room to run. We’re all family here at Northern, and it feels so good to come home and get a big, team win like this.”

In all three phases, the Lights played together for 60 minutes Saturday. But it was the final three minutes of the first half which broke the backs of the Blue Hawks, who had played extremely well in a close loss to Rocky Mountain College just last week.

With just over three minutes to play in the half, the Lights got the ball back one more time, and they methodically marched 80 yards, with Dean finding Jake Messerly, Nick Luoma and Baum on key pass plays. The biggest was a 39-yard catch hauled in by Baum which set the Lights up with a first-and-goal from the 4-yard-line. Two plays later, McKinley was in the endzone for the third time, and the Lights strolled into halftime with a commanding 27-3 lead.

“It felt like we came out much more focused and determined today, I think we had a chip on our shoulder today,” Dean said. “Especially offensively, I felt like we came out and hit them fast, and when we get up on teams like we did today, I think it’s hard for them to come back on us.”

And the Lights did get up. Northern dominated the time of possession in the first half, while McKinley went well over 100 yards, and MSU-N’s defense was staunch. The Lights finished the first half with three sacks, and a goal-line stand early in the second stanza, where they stopped DSU four times from the 3-yard-line.

“I think, mainly, we were playing more as a unit this time,” sophomore defensive end Tyler Craig, who registered two and a half sacks and a whopping four tackles for loss said of Northern’s defensive dominance. “We got all the bugs worked out in the first game, and defensively, as a whole, we played great today.”

The great play continued in the second half, too. Northern put DSU away for good when McKinley broke off a 66-yard run for his fourth touchdown just over a minute into the third quarter. DSU answered McKinley’s run with its first TD of the day, a 55-yard strike from Thad Lane to J.T. Keith, but it was a case of too little, too late.

The Lights came right back with another good drive and finished it with a 46-yard Jordan Reuschhoff field goal, sending Northern into the final frame with a 37-9 lead. In the last stanza, Reuschhoff added a 20-yard field goal following what was a 17-play, 91-yard drive where Northern didn’t throw the ball once. On that drive, sophomore Mario Gobbato carried the ball 13 times to set up the field goal. The Blue Hawks tacked on a late touchdown, but in the end, it was a dominant, and much-needed win for the Lights, who improved to 1-1 on the season, while also winning their fourth straight game against the Blue Hawks, who are now a member of the Northstar Athletic Conference after spending the last two seasons in the Frontier.

“There’s no better feeling than winning at home,” Craig said. “This was a good win for this team. But now we’ll get right back to work on Monday and get ready for Rocky.”

While the Lights will turn their attention to next Saturday’s huge home matchup with the nationally ranked Battlin’ Bears, they won’t overlook how well they played against the Blue Hawks. MSU-N put up a whopping 589 yards of offense, including 309 on the ground. While McKinley was the workhorse, rushing for 209 and catching six balls for another 101, Gobbato also tallied 66 yards on 19 totes. In the air, Dean finished the day 20-of-33 for 280 yards, two touchdowns and a couple of tipped interceptions. Baum followed up his breakout game last week at Tech by catching eight passes for 137 yards and one score. Many of Baum’s catches were leaping, key grabs that kept drives alive.

“I’m pleased with everything our offense did today,” Eldridge said. “I thought we were balanced, I thought we stretched the field with the passing game, and we were obviously very good with our running game. Those two running backs, with McKinley and Gobbato, are a very good 1-2 punch and that offensive line is really starting to gel. They are really starting to move people around. So it was really nice to see everything start to fit together offensively today.”
As sharp and explosive as the Lights were on offense, they were equally as good on defense. MSU-N held the Blue Hawks to just 177 total yards and 11 first downs. And up front, Northern shut down the once-potent DSU run game to the tune of -3 yards the entire game. Sophomore defensive end Jordan Brusio led all Lights with a sack, two tackles for loss and eight stops. Craig finished the game with seven tackles, while Tucker Dunn totaled three. Garrett Jericoff also had an interception, while Will DeVos and Patrick Barnett also registered sacks against Lane and third-string QB Brian Cronnelly.

“Those guys came out and executed our game plan,” Eldridge said of the defensive performance. “The d-line did a great job of putting pressure on them (Blue Hawks) and that helps our guys on the back end, and we were able to neutralize their passing attack.”

In all three phases, in all aspects of the game, the Lights executed, and executed well. And while Eldridge admitted it’s only one win, and one game, on a bright, sunny day at Blue Pony Stadium, the Lights, through all of the adversity they’ve faced over the last month, stood tall. They were dominant and sharp, and now they hope the win over the Blue Hawks gives them some strong momentum going forward.

“It is only one win,” Eldridge said. “And we understand we have to get right back to work and great ready for a very good football team coming in here next weekend. But it is a really good win for us, and what I think it does, it lets this team know that when they work hard, and when they’re focused like they were this entire week in practice and in the game today, when they do what they’re supposed to do, good things can and will happen. So now we just have to continue that trend, starting with practice on Monday, and get ready for the next opponent.”

“This was a great overall team win,” Dean said. “Being back at home, in front of our crowd, we needed this win bad. After everything we’ve gone through, this was a great win, and it’s really big for this team.”

The Lights will indeed get ready to host the No. 9 Battlin’ Bears this Saturday at Blue Pony Stadium. RMC beat UM-Western Saturday in an overtime thriller in Dillon.

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